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# Market as Place and Space of Economic Exchange

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# Chapter 13

# Tourists on the *Nasara*: The ritual ground as a space for commodification in Vanuatu, southwest Pacific

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## Introduction

Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides, is a nation state of over 80 islands in what is traditionally referred to as the culture area of Melanesia, in the southwest Pacific. As the New Hebrides, it was ruled by a joint Anglo-French Condominium from 1906 until 1980, when it gained independence and adopted its contemporary name. The area was documented from early contact history onwards, first by whalers, labour traders, missionaries and ethnologists and by the early twentieth century by some of the earliest anthropologists.[1] In contemporary Vanuatu, the production of culture takes place in contexts of cultural revival as well as tourism. Artefacts (*artifak* in Bislama, the Pidgin *lingua franca* used in the islands of the archipelago) that function in revived ritual performances are remade, danced and often sold after performance to incoming buyers such as tourists and art collectors such as museum curators and gallery owners. These 'customary arts' (Skinner and Bolton 2012) often feature in local cultural festivals which are held at regular intervals in the islands, often promoted by the state in an ongoing wave of revival of *kastom* and *kalja*.[2] During festivals, the value of culture and the arts is negotiated by all involved, but also culture itself is commodified. This generates ambivalence and a feeling of loss of culture among local people and visitors alike, but it also generates a series of values that relate to status and prestige among the former. The contemporary production of culture and the arts in Vanuatu is legitimized by notions of indigenized copyright (*kopiraet*), offering cultural as well as economic capital to producers and owners of objects and designs (for discussions of copyright in Vanuatu, see Geismar 2003; 2005a; 2005b).

The commodified ritual performance and, accordingly, the interaction between 'hosts' and 'guests' takes place on the *nasara* or ritual ground. A *nasara* is traditionally an outdoor space outside of or in close proximity to a village. It contains, or better

used to contain, a ritual house as well as all paraphernalia of previous rituals and in many cases the human remains of deceased Big Men. However, such ritual grounds have largely disappeared since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the influence of colonialism and the missions. It is only since the late 1970s and early 1980s that *nasara*s are beginning to resurface in the context of politicized *kastom* discourse and uses. Local communities in the islands are resurrecting their old *nasara*s, rebuilding them from the ground up, reviving their rituals and remaking the paraphernalia (the objects) that go with revival. Contemporary performances on *nasara*s, whether smaller or larger in scale, in the form of festivals almost always consist of dance sequences of performances of the past that are offered to local audiences as well as visitors. In most places the visitors are welcome, but in some they are kept away frominteraction. Visitors such as tourists do not just create the market, they also shape it in the sense that the local sculptor in Vanuatu today creates according to the tastes and desires of the Parisian or New York auction room-goer, a taste he knows and to which he accommodates himself. However, the local is one step ahead, in supplying what the buyer wants, namely the 'real' and 'authentic'. Based on fieldwork in Vanuatu between 2009 and 2011, primarily on the islands of Ambrym and Malakula, I argue here that local people have agency in the negotiations and transactions of art for money: they take part in globalization processes and in the global art world.

## Tourism in Vanuatu

Tourism is Vanuatu's fastest growing business (40% of GDP), with most tourism development taking place in and around Vanuatu's capital of Port Vila on Efate Island. Another centre of development is in and around Luganville, on Espiritu Santo. Efate, Santo and Tanna have the best kept road infrastructure and are the most accessible places by air and sea. They have been the main tourist sites in Vanuatu since the 1960s and 1970s (De Burlo 1989). Today, there is still a focus on the development of these locations (see, for example, the Vanuatu Tourism Development Master Plan 2004–2010). On Efate especially, however, the push for development has resulted in major problems over *kastom* land ownership. By 2008, 55% of all land on the island had been leased by expatriate investors and up to 90% of all coastal land (Rawlings 2008). By 2011 tourism, 'after years of stagnation, experienced a rapid growth' (Wittersheim 2011: 325). The number of visitors arriving by air rose by nearly 14% in 2007 and by 16% in 2008. And despite the world economic slowdown, tourist arrivals by air in January 2009 were 28% higher than in January 2008. By 2010, they exceeded 100,000 for the first time (*ibid*: 325).

Tourists in Vanuatu are the prime buyers of artefacts (Fig. 13.1). They buy the prototypical tourist arts, small enough to fit into a suitcase, but many of them are maturing into some sort of expert on their own terms and seek out those objects of culture that are also sought after by museum curators and other knowledgeable

*Fig. 13.1: Tourist art for sale at a Port Vila Handicraft market in 2009 (photo by the author).*

buyers. Tourists and tourism options in Vanuatu are of all sorts. Cruise ship tourists arrive by the thousands in Port Vila on Efate Island as well as in the more remote parts of the archipelago, where they can spend a couple of hours snorkelling or playing beach volleyball and consume some culture-on-the-side. In and around the urban centres of Port Vila and Luganville on Espiritu Santo, there is hotel and resort tourism, from basic to luxurious, with swimming pools and casinos. On Efate and Santo, moreover, guided tours and excursions to cultural villages and archaeological sites are available. Some tourists partake in the more adventurous offerings, such as hiking the Millennium Cave on Santo, diving Million Dollar Point and the SS *President Coolidge* just off the south coast of Santo (locally promoted as 'the world's most accessible shipwreck') or climbing Mount Yasur on Tanna (promoted as 'the world's most accessible active volcano'). As the next step up the adventure ladder, a smaller number of tourists explore the outer islands on their own, travelling by plane or cargo ship. In the islands, they stay in one of many locally owned bungalow businesses that offer the authentic experience of sleeping in a village hut under a thatched roof. These most adventurous of tourists go for rougher hikes, for example, up one of the rugged volcanoes on Ambrym. Others who get to these difficult-to-reach places are the yachties, as they are called in Vanuatu. Travelling on their own boats,

yachties get there with relative ease. While cruise-ship tourists are entertained on the beaches, where everything is brought to them, backpackers and yachties expect to see more pristine and authentic nature and culture.

It was Lissant Bolton who first noted the 'increasing reach of tourism in the outer islands' (2007: 27). Tourists, as well as evangelists, NGO workers, anthropologists, art collectors and Australian, English, French and other expatriates living in Vanuatu continually visit its many diverse islands. Tourist categories are known, but one kind of tourist can easily turn into another in the course of a trip: all-in package-deal tourists may explore outside the safely enclosed beaches of their resorts, while adventurers may want to experience some luxury in one of the fancier accommodation options at hand. The development of tourism is closely linked with the revival of culture. Cultural tourism brokers follow in the tracks of revivalist movements and festivals. Most island communities are happy to allow them and their customers into their sites and festivities, though others vehemently refuse.

For the island of Ambrym, a place that is known within the archipelago for its commodification of culture, Knut Rio noted that '[s]culptural art from Ambrym currently plays the role of spectacular and highly visible national symbols and represents an important asset for the island's tourist trade' (Rio 2009: 283), that *mage* male-graded ceremonial displays are 'nowadays displayed in ceremonial grounds [*nasaras*] for tourists' (*ibid.*: 285) and that its objects 'can easily be destroyed, banished, or sold to collectors and tourists' (*ibid.*: 306). For the island of Vao, Haidy Geismar also briefly mentions tourism, writing that Vao islanders today, while almost exclusively Christian, maintain their *nasaras* as sites of 'ancestry, memory, and identity' and ban tourists from visiting, unless a large sum of money is paid (2005b: 198).

Christopher Tilley reported on cruise-ship performances on the island of Wala, writing that these tourists were disappointed by the performances, calling them 'Disneyland in Vanuatu' (Tilley 1997: 79). Local cultural festivals aim at offering more pristine, authentic performances of culture and the arts.

## Commodification and cultural revival: The *Back to my Roots* Festival[3]

Festivals (Fig. 13.2) are held for the sake of cultural revival and promoted as such by the government as well as for the sake of tourism, offering opportunities for promoting *kastom* as well as a legitimate response to the few means of making a living by selling cultural performances and valued artefacts as commodities. This relates to earlier movements, when ritual and its objects were traded between different local groups, with some men and their communities receiving great power and prestige from this; this is known in the literature as a system of cultural commerce (cf. Patterson 1981: 2002). Today, it costs a tourist about 500 *Vatu* (Vanuatu's currency; 500 *Vatu* is approximately 5 USD) to take a photograph of a standing slit drum on Ambrym. A performance of *rom* masked dancers can be ordered in Fanla (Fig. 13.3 and 13.4), the *kastom* village of before on Ambrym. This commodified version of the *rom* dance is

*Fig. 13.2: The audience at the* Back to my Roots *Festival, Halhal Fantor* nasara, *2009 (photo by the author).*

*Fig. 13.3:* Rom *masks dancing during the* Back to my Roots *Festival; a colossal* atingting *is standing at the back of the* nasara *(photo by the author).*

*Fig. 13.4:* Rom *masks on sticks for sale after performance in the back of the performance ground at Halhal Fantor* nasara *2009 (photo by the author).*

performed on Fanla's *nasara* for 5000 *Vatu*. The main visitors to local cultural festivals, held in almost all the outer island locations throughout the dry season (also called the festival or yachtie season), are backpackers and yachties. Festivals usually take a couple of days and showcase a selection of ritual dances from the past. For a total of three days of festivities, the entry fee to the *Back to my Roots* festival in North Ambrym, which I highlight here, is 7000 *Vatu*. For that price, visitors get to see full-day programmes on the reopened Halhal Fantor *nasara*, including some male grade-taking ritual and an hour-long performance of the popular *rom* dance. By 2009, during my fieldwork in North Ambrym, *Back to my Roots* was the most successful festival in Vanuatu visitor-wise. At the time there were over twenty yachts anchored in front of the beach at Nobul. Some tourists had come in by boat or plane, as well as a couple of gallery owners.

*Back to my Roots* started out small in 2001, with no or hardly any visitors or paying customers attending in the first years. Chief Sekor is the organizer of the festival and is in charge of matters of *kastom*. He is assisted by Norbert Nabong, a local school principal who is in charge of the more practical aspects of organizing a festival. It is Norbert who gave the festival its name: 'Back to my Roots' is not just English, it is also a phrase that suits visitors' desires and expectations in seeing the roots of these peoples and their bygone cultural traditions. As Norbert told me during fieldwork, the festival was never intended for profit only but first and foremost 'to show the youths the old *kastom* ways and to encourage them to go back to their roots'. As the presenter at the festival, he announces each year in both French and English that it is 'pour l'éducation de nos enfants, for the education of our children'. Its aim is twofold. First, it is to show the young the old *kastom* ways. Secondly, the entry fees are used to pay for children's school fees. While in the past ritual cycles could take many years of preparation, at festivals it is now only the most dramatic fragments, the culminating points of the ritual, that are re-enacted. To some locals, revived male grade-taking at festivals is legitimate. Others dispute the revived Melanesian *Big Man*. Some locals say that *rom* at festivals serve as an example to show to tourists for money; others say that dancing the *rom* on the *nasara* with the drums beating is always 'the real thing', with 'the spirit inside'. Yet these *rom* are also offered for sale after the performance. A *rom* mask that was danced at the festival, which enhances the price – usage is meant to equal authenticity – has a fixed price of 150,000 *Vatu* (150 USD).

On the festival programme were several dance performances, such as *bata* (a dance traditionally associated with boys' incision), music demonstrations (drums and flute), the culminating point of two *mage* male grade-takings and a *rom* performance. All rituals were attenuated in form and content. The 'male-graded society' system of the past is disrupted, with no continuity in the transfer of male grades or knowledge. It is nowadays impossible for men to accumulate the wealth necessary for several grade-takings and thus climb up the ladder of power and prestige. *Mage* performed at *Back to my Roots* incurs only a fraction of the former costs that entailed transfers of energy and wealth for each item to which the candidate gained access (the rights to sacred insignia, dances, songs) and community participation in certain sequences, none of which has any place in today's revived *mage* ritual which is performed by only a few men. It is a spectacle to watch, not one in which to take part. The timing of the rites and the duration of the festival are too short for anything to be in real time, with many in-between performances keeping up the pace on the *nasara* for the audience. At the *Back to my Roots* festival, culture, in the form of the *mage* male-graded ritual, is performed for tourists as well as local people, who are mostly proud to see some of their lost and powerful past again.

## The *nasara* and the idea of 'the market'

The commodification of self and object takes place on the commercial *nasara*. Local people use their authenticity and the authenticity of their sites as a form of symbolic

capital in order to assert new kinds of power (cf. Lindholm 2008: 91). In Vanuatu, this means that people are eager to revive the performative and material aspects of their culture in order to re-establish their connections to a strong and powerful past which has been denied to them for a long time. It also means, however, that they wish to support their lives by providing their experience of culture to their tourist audiences for profit. Festivals are vehicles of commodification, aimed at providing an authentic experience for onlookers. Local people authenticate their *kastom* and validate their access to ancient *kalja*, while the tourist consumes the experience. To producers as well as consumers, the aspect that is central is that of 'performing the native'. This is why extraneous, 'modern' additions are excluded from performance, thus silencing its market aspect. The commodification of 'otherness' requires all 'others' to 'look other'. The authenticity of 'the native' equals 'cannibals' and 'savages', and as a trope this sells in a Western market. Local people exoticize themselves (Stanley 2007; Lindholm 2008) in order to satisfy the demand for 'the authentic other'. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in particular tied tourism and festivals together, writing that 'to festivalize culture is to make every day a holiday' (1998: 62). The staged performance becomes some sort of artefact, repeated, canonical (*ibid*.). People offer their culture-as-artefact (ibid.) and their wares in created back scenes on the side of the festival ground, again silencing the market and transactional aspects.

The point of reference for the contemporary setting of revival and commodification is the historical frame of collecting and collectors. For Vanuatu, there are two periods that stand out. The first period is that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when a curio trade flourished in the wider Melanesian region, resulting, eventually, in a demand which was far greater than the supply. The second, more recent period is that of the late colonial period of the 1960s and 1970s, just prior to independence. This is a period that was marked by an increase in supply as well as demand and an increase in travel and tourism: what is known as the global tourism boom of that era, creating a whole new market segment. From the local perspective, it was a period marked by heightened tensions regarding copyright and ownership. The 1960s and 1970s are known as the time when the last of the Big Men who had achieved their position in the traditional sphere were still active on some of the islands. It was a time, local people now agree, that saw 'the last of the real'. Today, within ongoing revivalist movements in which ritual is re-enacted and objects reproduced, what constitutes 'the real' is still very present. Supply nowadays is increasingly being fine-tuned with demand, even though the supply is now greater than the demand. As local people see it, 'museums do not need anything anymore; they already have everything'. Prices, usually agreed by knowledgeable locals, elders and chiefs, are now often reduced by those who are eager to sell. A remark often heard by those opposed to this tendency is that 'the market is spoiled now'.

The history of the commodification of culture and the arts is best exemplified by the Ambrym and Malakula setting. The islands of Ambrym and Malakula in the north-central area of the archipelago are known as places with strong *kastom*. They are the beholders of revitalized *kastom* in competitive/festival ways. That Ambrym

and Malakula are competitive is exemplified by the fact that Southeast Malakulans today refer to the Ambrymese and specifically the North Ambrymese as stealers of *kastom*: 'they stole our tam-tam design', it is said, 'and are since making big money with it'.[4] The North Ambrymese have been selling their slit drums (*atingting* in the North Ambrym language) for decades to international museums. The documented history of the commodification and, subsequently, saturation of *atingting* on the market starts with the former Big Men and ethno-preneurs Tain Mal and his son Tofor, who ran a lucrative artefact business out of their village of Fanla, in North Ambrym, and into the world in the 1960s and 1970s (see also Patterson 1976; 1981; 2001; 2002). At the time, the *kastom* people were an important minority in the *kastom* movement, as well as in the tourist arena that was also emerging in those years. Tain Mal and Tofor claimed *kastom* copyright of slit drums as their own while at the same time developing new forms and designs (cf. Geismar 2005a: 448–450). In current contexts, in which supply exceeds demand, makers know that their slit drums, or any other items they wish to sell, still need to look old if they want to get a good price for their frozen-in-time 'masterpieces of tribal art'. Local people know that a 'masterpiece', from a Western viewpoint, signifies something rare or unique, exquisitely carved, sometimes attributed to a specific artist, and 'worth' – due to the frequent use of the dubious term by dealers and connoisseurs – incalculable sums of money in a Western art market.

## Conclusion

The commodification of self and object is a dual process, a politically motivated expression of identity by local people, as well as an economic response to the global expansion of the tourism industry. In Vanuatu, this happens in a context of cultural revival that goes far beyond commodification alone. For Damian Skinner and Lissant Bolton, cultural revival is an important element of what they term 'customary arts', repeating the factors that stimulate its production. These can be a desire for continuity by local people, but also tourism, anthropological intervention, political considerations and demand in the art world (Skinner and Bolton 2012: 473). Revival is a tool representing the ongoing relevance of the past in the present by linking contemporary art practices with ideas of the past while reclaiming the value of old objects in the present (*ibid.*: 467). For Vanuatu, as we saw, the '*nasara* as a market space' is closely linked with the global art market and with supply and demand. The same strategies apply, albeit it in different forms, hidden from view, as a way of functioning successfully in some sort of 'authenticity' trade. The main vehicle, as we also saw, is the local cultural festival, to which entry fees are charged and where ritual artefacts are transformed into much desired artworks by commodification processes such as performance and dance. As David Graeber has noted, a market-based ideology presents us with a set of propositions: 'We are unique individuals who have unlimited desires; since there is no natural cut-off point at which anyone will have enough power, or money, or pleasure, or material possessions, and since resources are scarce, this means

we will always be in at least tacit competition' (Graeber 2001: 214). When customary arts become commercial, they shift meaning and value in going from island to auction room, and beyond. In travelling, they gain both monetary value and an authentic aura.

Festivals, as moments of *kastom* as well as commodification, are competitive. *Kastom* unites, but it divides as well, as it did in the past. Old *kastom* rivalries between villages that continue to exist are now fought out in festivals, on commercial ritual grounds. People charge money to safeguard the authenticity of their sites and objects, or what they wish to present as authentic. They achieve this by controlling tourist access. To the tourist, access conveys authentic experience. Their respective desires meet somewhere in the middle. The opening up of ritual sites at controlled moments generates income while at the same time providing an authentic experience to tourists (since they are among 'the lucky few'). The quest for authenticity, for the authentic experience or 'the real thing', is catered for by the authentic 'native'. This too generates ambivalence. That, nowadays, only a few men partake in male-graded ritual generates discussion and disagreement on the local level, not least about who holds these rights (*kopiraet*) and about the nature of *kastom*. What is brought on to the stage is some sort of bricolage of ritual, fragments of the vast and powerful ritual complexes of the past in which sacred and secular elements were combined and which consumed a lot of peoples' energies and resources. On the other hand, wearing the paraphernalia that were once signs of status and prestige gives pride to the wearer and, in the right circumstances, renewed status and prestige. Underlying the positive material benefits made through sales to tourists and several other kinds of art collectors is an ongoing concern by all – 'hosts' and 'guests' alike – that these sorts of transactions are involved in issues of appropriation and cultural loss.

### *Notes*

1. Then Cambridge students John Layard and A. B. Deacon carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Vanuatu in 1914–1915 and 1926–1927. Layard, a pupil of W. H. Rivers at Cambridge, worked in northeast Malakula (Vao, Atchin and Wala). Deacon, a pupil of A. C. Haddon, worked in southwest Malakula and briefly on Ambrym. He died in Southwest Bay nearing the end of his fieldwork. Layard only published some of his findings, abundant with data, in 1942 (on Vao; volumes on Atchin and Wala were supposed to follow but never did), while Deacon's work, based on fieldwork only some years later but of a rather pessimistic 'salvage anthropology' kind, was posthumously published in 1934.
2. There is a vast body of literature on the emergence of the politicized concept of *kastom* ('custom'); for discussions, see, amongst others, Bolton 1993; 1994; 2003; 2007; 2011; Jolly 1982; Lindstrom 1994; 1997; Tonkinson 1982). The terms *kalja* and *tredisin* ('culture', 'tradition') were first used in the radio program *Kastom, Kalja, and Tredisin* in the 1970s, so introducing them in Bislama vocabulary (Bolton 2003: 29). It took until the 1990s until the word kalja was used by people in the islands (*ibid.*).
3. I have published another overview of the *Back to my Roots* festival as DeBlock (2013).
4. For a discussion of slit drum designs, see Patterson (1996). Patterson illustrates that what is now considered to be the typical Ambrym-style slit drum also occurred in southeast Malakula, at least until the early twentieth century, and that it was probably an item of trade or a return

payment for the acquisition of ritual between southeast Malakula and western Ambrym, areas which are known to have operated a system of ritual commerce (see Patterson 1981; 1996; 2001; 2002). For an overview of traditional trade links, see Bonnemaison (1996), Huffman (1996).

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